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Root cause analysis of sexual harassment and proposed solutions: Part 1

Hypothesis:

No one is born a rapist. A person's childhood experiences shape and influence their decisions and attitudes in adulthood.

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Identifying the root causes of sexual harassment and solutions to deter the same

Introduction

In the past couple of years, we have seen a massive wave of people coming out and talking about their sexual harassment experiences. Through the #metoo[1] movement, we have realized that it is not just the incidents reported in digital or print media but neighbors, co-workers and sometimes our family members have been the victims of these acts. It is closer to us than we could have imagined. For many girls and women, it has become a routine to get eve-teased or molested while waiting for a ride, walking back home late at night or just traveling in a bus. The harassment is so normalized that most fail to see the wrong. Irrespective of public or private place, the fear of being abused is high amongst women and girls in India. From the Kathua case in India to the Harvey Weinstein case in the USA, women are susceptible to sexual violence anywhere, anytime irrespective of their class or ethnicity.

Encouraging the victims to speak up, amending laws for speedy justice, teaching young kids self-defense are some common ways to help victims and avoid potential sexual abuse. These actions are based on the assumption that the victim has already or will in the future face sexual harassment. The motive for anyone to sexually harass someone known or unknown to them remains an unresolved question. It is essential to address the victims and prepare the next generation to be able to defend themselves against these acts. However, it is more important to address this disease at its roots and create a society where the fear of sexual harassment becomes obsolete.

In this paper, we look at the underlying reasons for people to turn into a sexual harasser or a rapist. What is it that pushes and provokes them to such mindsets and actions that they do not find the act wrong? The surrounding environment influences every human, and shapes them as they grow. So, what are the characteristics of this detrimental environment and its effect on childhood and adulthood? This paper looks at how we can make our surrounding better for our future generation to turn them into responsible adults and to be able to classify an act as sexual abuse.

We have approached this problem by considering two hypothesis. These hypotheses have been studied and have been rationalized with the help of other research papers. This paper (Part 1) concentrates on Hypothesis 1 where we study how the childhood of an individual affects their mindset when they are in their adulthood. In part two of the paper, we look at the laws laid out in different countries for the abusers.

Hypothesis 1:

No one is born a rapist. A person's childhood experiences shape and influence their decisions and attitudes in adulthood.

As John. F. Kennedy once said "Children are the world's most valuable resources and the best hope for the future" it is imperative to bring them up with right values and influence them with our actions. Every child has a unique childhood and distinct experiences while growing up which dramatically influences the adult they turn into. Parents, teachers, and friends are their significant influencers and role models, and hence as adults, it is upon us to give them the best environment to grow in. For the study of our first hypothesis, "No one is born a rapist. Childhood experiences influences their decision", we are going to look at a hypothetical childhood of a sexual offender and study the effect of few different experiences on their character and decision making as they turn into an adult.

Data findings and discussion

Self-defense, sexual awareness, and enhanced security are the significant steps being taken to prevent sexual violence. What goes into a person who turns into a rapist is the question we are trying to answer. Most of the actions taken to curb sexual violence are prevention and cure for the victims, but we need to realize that we need much powerful treatments for offenders' disorder. The reason why an offender commits sexual harassment in the first place, remains unaddressed. This study focuses on the factors influencing the development of a child into a sexual offender. The materials in this paper are not obtained from independent research but a collation of multiple research on the topic of sexual violence and the development of sexual predators. For this study, we built a hypothetical childhood of a sexual offender and weighed each experience which might have been the major influencer on them. Majority of a child's interaction is with their family, school, and these days media (TV & internet). Hence this study focuses on these environments in detail.

Classifying few of the traumatic experiences of children under the bracket of family, school, and media this study looks at findings influencing their sexual activity in their adulthood. Past experiences influence their attitude and decision-making skills under an emotionally and physically charged situations.

1. Dysfunctional family characteristics

- Physically/emotionally abused by parents
- Neglected childhood resulting in the child having no empathy
- Inferiority complex leading to poor social skills
- Excessive alcoholism by parents and abusive behavior towards the spouse
- Stereotypical roles in the family

Both child sexual abusers and rapists were found to have been exposed to frequent experiences of physical and emotional abuse, parental abuse and neglect. In one of the experiments [2] by Beauregard, Lussier, and Proulx (2004) it was found that physical and verbal abuse during childhood led to antisocial behavior and callous personality traits, both of which led to aggressive sexual fantasies. Likewise, Salter and colleagues [4] (2003) also indicated that the combination of physical, emotional and domestic violence on the child predicted subsequent sexual offending in the future. Children raised in an emotionally impoverished environment are usually unable to identify their emotions. They are likely to become confused when confronted with emotionally charged situations and react to confusing situations with extreme aggression. Rapists were observed to have gone through a higher rate of childhood physical abuse than non-violent men.

Majority of the sexual offenders failed to establish secure relationship bonds with their family/parents. Hence they failed to develop sufficient social skills and self-esteem necessary to achieve healthy intimacy with the adults. Poor parental bonding enhances the effect of child maltreatment and makes them more vulnerable. This induces a lack of empathy for others which subsequently initiates the process that leads to sexual offense [2].

Majority of rapists believe that women who step out of the traditional roles deserve and are asking to be in compromised situations. They hold stereotyped beliefs that there are proper distinct roles for men and women in the society and are rigid about them. Because of this distorted perception, it allows them to have a wrong perception of their victims. Victims' resistance towards sexual intimacy is disregarded as "women say no to sex even when they want it." It was observed that rapists have deep-seated anger and disappointment towards their mother/father which feed their view of stereotypical beliefs and behavior [4].

A similar pattern has been found for female sexual abusers too. Simons and colleagues [2] (2008) found that the majority of female sexual offenders reported physical abuse, emotional abuse, and have been a witness of domestic violence. Although the frequency of physical abuse among female sexual offenders was less than for males, females were more likely to be abused by both male and female perpetrators. Female sexual offenders were more likely than male offenders to report witnessing violence perpetrated by a female; male rapists and indiscriminate offenders more often witnessed violence by a male perpetrator.

From the above few research papers, it is evident that any form of abuse on children drastically affects their perception and has an impact on their sexual life in the future. Abuses pave the way for a blurry distinction between consensual and non-consensual acts of sex in their minds.

Solutions

The first step in deterring abusive childhood is to identify the children who are growing up in an unhealthy environment. One must look for signs as it is not easily evident from the external appearance of a family. Physical abuse might be easier to recognize, unlike emotional abuse. Counselors and specialized programs can help with the treatment of abused children. Below are few proposed solutions to identify the children abused by their family and in ensuring a safe childhood:

❖ Counseling in schools by the teachers/NGOs on a periodic basis. Identifying the patterns in the children behavior and answers. Look for physical abuse marks on children's body and keeping records of their medical history.
❖ Child abuse fast dial helpline numbers for immediate help and action.
❖ Educate parents who are in the phase of pregnancy about the influence of their behavior on children and their development.
❖ Make regular checkups with the doctors mandatory till the child reaches adulthood. This can indicate any physical/emotional trauma children might be going through.

For the steps identified above, we need to ensure we have quantity and quality of the resources available to provide full care to the children in all stages. Considering the ever-growing population of India, it is difficult to ensure enough resources in all parts of the country. Once the child has been identified for any of the abusive patterns, we need to ensure that we have professional organizations handling and caring for them until they get to adulthood.

2. Poor schooling environment

- Physical abuse by teachers
- Bullying by peers
- Lack of sex education

After family, school is the next environment where children have most of their interaction and growth. During their childhood, they spend about an average of 9-10 hours in school and with their friends. The sexual or physical abuse they might experience from teachers or friends will impact their perception of self and result in low self-esteem. This low self-esteem leads to poor social skills and inferiority complex. It might deter children from having adequate and appropriate conversations with people around them. For children raised in such an impoverished environment, showcasing their feelings or emotions are very hard and they are under constant threat to appear weak. An abused child might be confused when confronted with emotionally charged situations and react to confusing situations with extreme aggression [2].

Very few children are equipped with the right knowledge and preparation when heading to an adult sexual life. Within the Indian context, it is very rare for children to have an open discussion with trusted adults about sex. This lack of communication, results in confusing and conflicting views about gender and sexuality. Children develop a wrong perception of sex and its aftermath. According to UNESCO [5] (2009), the primary goal of sexuality education is to "equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships. In addition to learning about the risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), children and young people also need to learn about the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. Recognizing these when they occur, protecting themselves and identifying available sources of support is critical. For example, distinguishing between "good" and "bad" touch, learning how to express feelings, to resist pressure and to seek help are all integral aspects of sex education that are also highly pertinent to sexual abuse".

Solutions

Irrespective of the abusive environment (at home or in school), the identification method for abused children remains the same. Children are more hesitant to come forward and express their turmoil if their abuser is in an authoritative position. Other than the measures mentioned previously, here are the few additional steps that schools can consider to ensure a safer learning environment:

❖ Make sex-ed mandatory in all school and ensure it is taken seriously by having tests or including it in the exams.
❖ Start educating children from a young age about safe and unsafe touch.
❖ Run a background check on all employees and monitor teachers' behavior to ensure they have a healthy relationship with the students
❖ Strict rules and regulation on bullying and monitoring hostels and classrooms.

Sayfty Workshop for children: Safe and Unsafe touch

A BBC report [26] in 2017 stated that "In India, a child is sexually abused every 15 minutes, according to the government figures". From the crime report released by Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh in 2016, 106,958 cases of crime against children were recorded. 36,022 were recorded under POSCO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) [26].

Image courtesy: www.sayfty.com

With such alarming statistics on child sexual abuse, it is imperative to create awareness and educate children about their safety. Parents for various reasons, hesitate to have an open conversation about sex with their children for various reasons. Hence Sayfty regularly conducts workshops for children and parents to educate them about the issue appropriately.

For example, this 60 minutes workshop [27] conducted in Hyderabad, India and was for children aged 5-12 years. During the topic the following topics were discussed:

1. Our bodies are unique: Encouraged the children to open up and discuss about their bodies.
2. Private parts of our body: Emphasized about the private parts of our body by highlighting and naming them.
3. Safe and Unsafe touch: Educated the children about the safe and unsafe touches.
4. Trusted circle: Identified the adults(parent and teachers) to whom they can reach out and report any unsafe touches.
5. Reinforcing the rules: A recap of all the rules of safe and unsafe touches discussed over the workshop.

Sayfty has been receiving requests from schools and parents to organize more of these workshops. The current goal is to conduct at least 1-2 workshops every month and raise awareness amongst children and parents to prevent future abuse.

3. Unmonitored Media/Internet interaction

- Early exposure to pornography
- Exposure to violent media
- Unmonitored use of media

In today's age any information can be found on the internet at the click of a button, it is unimaginably easy for children to be exposed to adult videos and pornographic images. Despite movies/videos being rated and classified, access to adult videos and content is easy. Videos that have a high amount of violence and pornography are inappropriate for children. It is not only the parent's responsibility but also the video makers and providers to ensure that unintended audience is not consuming their media. Children as young as 8-9 years are reportedly coming across sexually explicit material through the internet and other sources. This may lead to undesirable actions by them like early sex (casual and unprotected), high-risk sex, sexual addiction, and violence [14].

According to a study in 2012[14] movies, shows and music influences teens' sexual behavior and attitude. A study by Dr. Jennings Bryant found that around 66% of boys and 40% of girls in high school wanted to try sexual behaviors they saw in the media. In another study of 932 sex addicts, 90% of men and 77% of women reported that pornography was a significant factor in their addiction and that such content is available to the younger generation. This might put children in vulnerable positions and addiction to sex can be seen surfacing at a very young age.

Most of the violence from sexual abusers emerge directly or indirectly from "Sexually violent subcultures". Examples include college fraternities where the use of violent pornography is a frequent form of entertainment, providing explicit images of rape as being acceptable, non-criminal and a sign of male virility. Within such subcultures, the more the number of sexual intercourse they have the better is their opinion about themselves and each other. The use of violence or coercion is viewed as "manly" and is prevalent in such environment [4].

It is reported [2] that sexual offenders who are witness to sexual abuse as a child, had more frequent exposure to pornography before the age of 10 or had early sexual experiences with peers. Similar to child sexual abusers (i.e., 62 percent), 58 percent of indiscriminate offenders reported an early onset (before age 11) and high frequency of masturbation. A vast majority of sexual offenders (81 percent) disclosed engaging in bestiality during childhood. Of a subsample of 42 female sexual offenders, Simons and colleagues [2] (2008) reported that multiple perpetrators had sexually abused the majority (81 percent) at a young age with high frequency. Likewise, many female offenders were exposed to pornography before age 10, but early exposure is significantly more prevalent among male sexual offenders. Similar to male offenders, females report engaging in bestiality during adolescence too.

Solutions

Below are a few proposed actions that can be taken by media providers to ensure the right audience consumes their content:

- ❖ For all adult content videos, have strict regulations on who can view these videos. For videos requiring parental guidance, have pop-ups shown to enter a passcode or answer security questions instead of having just "OK"/"Next" click buttons. The passcodes can be set up for every device with internet connection ability to protect young children from accessing such videos.
- ❖ Have adult content videos ask for regular passcodes to safeguard children from accessing the video by accident.
- ❖ Restrict showcase of adult movies/content during children prime time.
- ❖ Even with all the restrictions, there is always the issue of pirated videos being circulated amongst the children from peer to peer. These videos need to be encrypted and have strict legal actions against duplication or circulation of the content.

Owing to the changes in their body and hormones, children entering puberty and adolescence tend to be more curious about sex and sexuality. It is not unusual to hear about them at school, friend's house or in a playground. Their idea of sex will be obscure, and they generally feel uncomfortable to talk about it with their parents. They will try seeking out information by themselves and might not end up getting the right awareness about sex, and the aftermath. Parents might find it difficult to have this conversation with their children, but they must realize that it is preferred for children to learn it from them than from less reliable sources. Rather than trying to avoid the topic, parents should teach children about safe sex.

Conclusion

Care, caution, and education in early childhood leads to not only a child's healthy development but also a responsible transformation into a self-aware adulthood. Parents must ensure a safe environment for their children. It is critical that we pay extra attention to children's family, school, and friends circle. This is where a majority of their interaction lies. Children look up to their parents for being their confidant. However, when the family condition is hostile or abusive, it is difficult for them to open up to other people. In such cases, we need teachers or counselors in whom they can confide. India is one of the most populated countries and ensuring a counselor for every child becomes a challenge. A model to effectively allocate resources to help us identify and prevent child abuse is necessary. Specialized organizations and programs need to be set up in identifying abused children and their patterns. Once we identify the victims, we must ensure that we provide them treatment for their abuse and a safer environment to heal and grow. Additional research is required to develop extensive models to treat and nourish children with any history of abuse to help them lead a healthy lifestyle in their adulthood.

From this paper, it is evident that childhood experiences and conditions play a crucial role in the development of an adult and their decision making capability in stressful situations. This can be undoubtedly regarded as one of the factors contributing towards spawning of an abuser. Actions taken to prevent child abuse in turn might reduce the number of perpetrators in the future. Children are highly vulnerable and dependent on their inner circle of adults for basic needs. When we see children showing emotional distress or behavioral issues it is necessary for us to address it in the right way. Though it is hard to define a perfect childhood, providing a safe environment and enabling them to have open conversations to express themselves is half the battle won.

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